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18 June 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Communist Threat in Southeast Asia

1. The effort to check Communist gains in Southeast Asia is admittedly one of the most difficult undertakings of US policy and one which at present seems to offer no very sure promise of success. It is sometimes suggested that, because the means now being employed in this effort are so costly and unpromising, the only real solution is somehow to remove what is said to be the main source and support of the Communist threat in the area -- Communist China. This paper examines the validity of such a view of the situation in Southeast Asia.

2. Communism can gain control of additional countries in one of two ways, by military conquest from without or by subversion and revolution within. It is true that the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe and North Korea owe their existence to Soviet military power, but the Soviet military occupation of these areas was incident to World War II. For both doctrinal and practical reasons it is not Communist policy

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today to seek expansion by overt military conquest. Communist China does of course have the military capability to overrun the states of Southeast Asia, but it is extremely unlikely that in the contemporary international climate even the fanatical Chinese would attempt so crass an act of aggression.

3. In Southeast Asia, as everywhere else in the world, the main danger of Communist domination arises from internal factors, not from external ones. Backwardness and poverty, expectations for a better life which ineffectual and corrupt governments fail to meet -- these provide the soil in which communism takes root and, with its simple doctrines of class vengeance and its promises of progress, finds fanatical adherents. A Communist movement may in favorable circumstances be assisted from abroad, but its main strength is derived from the vulnerability of the society in which it operates. If the state in question is neighbor to a state already under Communist control, assistance across the border may become important when a Communist party becomes strong enough to launch revolutionary warfare. But no Communist party has ever grown strong simply because it was operating adjacent to a Communist state, and a number have done so without this advantage, the most recent example being that of Cuba.

4. That proximity to a Communist power is not enough to cause a state to fall victim to Communist subversion and revolutionary warfare is manifest from the experience of those states which are neighbors of the USSR and its European satellites. All of these states have been exposed to subversive efforts from the Bloc but none has been taken over. Scandinavia is geographically placed in relation to the USSR somewhat as Southeast Asia is in relation to China, but in 45 years this area has never been in any serious danger of being subverted by communism. Greece survived a civil war in which the Communists were supported from adjacent Bloc territory and there is no serious Communist threat in Greece today. Communism failed to get off the ground in Austria despite the Soviet occupation. Turkey has no Communist problem despite decades of Soviet propaganda and diplomatic pressure. Even so weak and corrupt a government as that of Iraq has not fallen to communism. In some of these countries US aid has played a role in their resistance, but in every case the indispensable factor has been the resistance of the local people and government themselves.

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\* It is true that Yugoslavia eventually withdrew its support from the Greek Communists, but Bulgaria and Albania did not. Even if the Yugoslavs had not done so, there is no reason to believe that the Greek Communists would have won.

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5. For a variety of historical and cultural reasons the states of Southeast Asia are more vulnerable. Most are former colonies which have not yet achieved stable governments or developed an effective apparatus of state administration. The drag of traditionalism and backwardness on the one hand, and the pressures for development and modernization on the other, give rise to deep social tensions. Few political leaders understand very much about the world scene or even about the forces at work in their own societies. Altogether the states of Southeast Asia offer the kind of political-social quagmire in which Communist subversion can operate to best advantage.

6. Even so, the governments of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaya are not today exposed to any serious threat of Communist internal revolutionary war like that now being waged in South Vietnam. To some extent their very backwardness and traditionalism is a protection against the intrusion of Communist subversion, since the latter propagates ideas and methods profoundly alien to the ancient ways. They have the advantage of enjoying freedom from colonial control, and with nationalist feelings already attached to the independence they now have, the Communists cannot exploit the theme of national liberation which has been their main appeal in other areas. Economically, these states are able to sustain their populations fairly well by Asian peasant standards. The present governments,

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though not very effective or progressive, are not regarded by their peoples as particularly oppressive. They are willing to undertake measures to cope with their internal problems, and show some promise of meeting the further problems which disruption of the traditional social fabric through modernization will bring. Communist agitation in these countries, despite its local origins, will tend to be associated with the danger of Chinese domination; with feelings of nationalism growing, native forms of social change are likely to be preferred. The ability of external Communist forces to bring these states under Communist control merely by example and influence seems likely to be limited.

7. If the Communists were to win control in Laos and South Vietnam, the danger that communism would penetrate the other states of Southeast Asia would of course increase -- if only because it would probably be believed in these states that communism's further advance was inevitable. This belief would be stimulated by the demonstration that US aid had not proved effective in Laos and South Vietnam. There might then be a loss of nerve and will on the part of the existing regimes, and a step-by-step subversion of the governments themselves, with or even without mass revolutionary action, might occur. If local Communists became strong enough to go over to revolutionary warfare, across-the-border support from Communist territory would in-

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8. However, internal communism would not necessarily become that strong and the fall of all Southeast Asia by a process of internal war supported from abroad would not be the inevitable outcome. It is entirely possible that, even if Laos and South Vietnam were lost to communism, the other states of the area would still find the strength and will to mobilize their assets for resistance, and would in the end preserve their national independence. The manner in which communism won in South Vietnam and Laos could give rise to a variety of unforeseeable counter-forces both within and outside the area. In any case, the projection of Chinese Communist power over all of Southeast Asia would not be a foregone conclusion.

9. The present struggle to check the Communist assault on South Vietnam and Laos is thus of major if not necessarily decisive importance for the whole area. These two countries are really involved in a single action of revolutionary warfare, since the main source of outside support for the subversive effort in both areas is located in Hanoi. The case of Laos is relevant to the theme of this analysis precisely because the prospects for halting a Communist takeover there have grown so dim: it is the classic case which illustrates that the real strength for a successful resistance to Communist revolutionary warfare must be found within the society itself and cannot be supplied wholly from outside. If Laos is lost to communism it

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will not be because the US failed to provide aid on a substantial scale, but because its government is ineffective and has not been able to imbue its people with a will to resist.

10. The vigorous Communist regime in North Vietnam, which is now supporting the dangerous revolutionary war in South Vietnam, was not created by Communist China and is not acting as the latter's agent. It found its origins and strength in the anticolonialist struggle against the French, a struggle which Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were waging before the Chinese Communists won power in Peiping. Although in the later stages the Vietnamese Communists did receive help from China, their real strength was that they had captured the movement for national liberation within their own country. It was because they identified themselves with the nationalist cause rather than because they propagandized the peasants into believing in Marx and Lenin or Mao that they became strong enough to defeat the French. The revolutionary warfare they are waging in South Vietnam today is an extension of that nationalist struggle.

11. The slogans of national liberation promise not only to fulfill nationalist aspirations but also to rectify social evils associated with the colonialist period. The revolutionary mood in the peasant villages which responds to Communist leadership expresses a hope that backwardness and poverty can at last be overcome by a new order of things. The mood of the

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Vietnamese peasants is not in this respect different from that of peasants in other underdeveloped areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but in Vietnam the Communists have succeeded in stimulating and organizing peasant unrest into revolutionary action. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the traditional social order has been exposed to great strains in the turmoil of a war which has been going on in Indochina for 20 years. Under these conditions, it is natural that the Communists have found in the youth, whose whole experience of politics has been in the disruption of these years, the numerous dedicated recruits which revolutionary warfare requires.

12. Unfortunately, in a nation where the pressures for national fulfillment and for radical social change are very great, the government in Saigon has allowed itself to be characterized as conservative. However praiseworthy its purposes may be, its methods of rule are traditional and it has not therefore been able to associate with itself the aspirations for change found in the population. It has not been the equal of the Communists in ability to organize its power potential -- political, economic, and military -- for the revolutionary civil war being waged against it. Beyond this, it is associated with Western powers, is guaranteed by them through SEATO, and is receiving massive economic and military aid from the US, an ally of the former colonial power. It is therefore vulnerable

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to the charge of being in a degree a continuation of the colonial regime and a hindrance to nationalist and racialist vindication.

13. What we are resisting in Vietnam, therefore, is not a projection of Communist power from China but a revolutionary war waged with nationalist slogans and led by Communists who are Vietnamese. The role of China in relation to this war is being in a supporting one, and this role is less important in a material than in a political sense: what is important is that a powerful Communist regime exists in Peking and declares that it "cannot be indifferent" to a buildup of Western influence and military power in states on its southern border. In a material sense, the support of the USSR, remote geographically as it is, has been more important to Hanoi than China's. But the Communist capability in Vietnam rests in the first instance on the power and appeal of the Vietnamese Communists themselves.

14. Consequently, it is incorrect to describe US policy in South Vietnam as merely operating on the fringes of the real threat. The real threat, and the heart of the battle, is in the villages and countryside of Vietnam and Laos. That battle can be won only by the will, energy, and political acumen of the resisting governments themselves. US power can supplement and enlarge their power but it cannot be a substitute. Even if the US could defeat the Communists militarily by a massive injection of its own forces, the odds are that what it would win would be,

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not a political victory which created a stable and independent government, but an uneasy and costly colony. Frustrating and uncertain of outcome as it may be, there is therefore no serious alternative to the policy we are following -- aiding, encouraging, and cajoling the local governments to do the things which they must do, and which only they can do, to secure their own defense. And in South Vietnam, despite formidable obstacles, it is still possible to believe that this policy has a reasonable prospect of success.

15. It is obvious that the collapse of the Communist regime in China, while it would not end, would at least greatly ease the struggle against communism in Southeast Asia, if only because the psychological effect of so immense an event would alter the whole array of political forces in that area, and indeed in the entire world. But it is difficult to imagine how the US can bring about a change of regime in China. Even if it were conceivable that this could be done by US military power, it would be virtually impossible for the US, given its own political character and all its involvements with allies and neutrals as leader of the Free World, to decide on such a course of action toward China. If it did so, the political costs and risks all around the world would be enormous.

16. Moreover, assuming a US military involvement with Communist China however it might come about, it is scarcely

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possible to leave the USSR out of account. We have repeatedly estimated that the USSR considers that it is vitally interested in the survival of a Communist regime in China. Despite the current rift in Chinese-Soviet relations, it has to be assumed that the very specific commitments the Soviets have to the defense of China under the alliance remain in force, and would be honored by them. Failure to do so would jeopardize not only communism in China, but the USSR's world position and its leadership of the Communist movement as a whole. This does not mean that the USSR would automatically go to all-out nuclear war if China was involved in hostilities with the US. But it does mean that almost certainly the USSR would actively support China at whatever level of hostilities was necessary to maintain Communist power there. Consequently, the risk of nuclear war developing would be very great.

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